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EXPLORING THE DISTINCTIVE MOOD CHANGE OF THE ENGLISH SOLDIER POETS DURING THE GREAT WAR

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Abstract:

No conflict has ever been so closely linked and portrayed with the poetry and literature of its age than the First World War. The First World War or the Great War challenged existing conventions, morals, and ideals more than any war. Before the Great War, there was little or no anti-war art. The era of the First World War had seen a distinctive mood change among writers and poets. Inspired by first-hand experience of the trenches, poets such as Sassoon distinguished themselves from old Greek and Latin poets who had traditionally portrayed war in a lyrical, romantic way. The nature of war itself had changed dramatically and it was this gritty realism which Sassoon and Owen and their contemporaries embraced and which would directly influence future literature and poetry of the 20th century and afterwards. The First World War generated a plethora of anti-war reactions in the visual arts as well as other arts such as literature and poetry. War poetry accommodates binary oppositions, most notably life and death.

Key Words: *Great War, disillusion.*

The era of the First World War had seen a distinctive mood change among writers. The war poets of the Great War have three different major moods and reactions towards the war. Robert Brooke is the most famous representative of the initial reaction of to the war. He represented the first mood towards the war which was a patriotic promoting to drive the writer from school or college to join the colours; it has attained poetic form in stilted rhetoric and the radiant assurance of the untested ideals. Siegfried Sassoon is the most vigorous exponent of the anger and disillusion. He has represented the second mood towards the war where the poets began to find reasons for becoming tentative in their patriotism and with drawing into a more meditative position. The poets here looked into their hearts and write with greater honesty. However, by the end of war, during bloodshed and misery intensify, the outcome seems no more certain no more swiftly attained. Protest against the continuance of hostilities makes old romanticism both blind and morally objectionable. There emerges from all the experience a moment in which a poet ceases to be moralist and accepts the state of war as the inevitable condition against which the individual's struggle is fruitless. That was the last mood during war time. Wilfred Owen, who attempted to take these war themes into more generalized vein and to apply new techniques for his wider vision on war, has represented the third mood towards the war.

Introduction to War and Poetry:

Poets have written about the experience of war since the Greeks, but the young soldier poets of the First World War established war poetry as a literary genre. Their combined voice has become one of the defining texts of Twentieth Century Europe.

In 1914 hundreds of young men in uniform took to writing poetry as a way of striving to express extreme emotion at the very edge of experience. The work of a handful of these, such as Brooke, Owen, Rosenberg and Sassoon, has endured to become War Poetry. War poetry is not necessarily 'anti-war'. It is,

however, about the very large questions of life: identity, innocence, guilt, loyalty, courage, compassion, humanity, duty, desire, and death. Its response to these questions, and its relation of immediate personal experience to moments of national and international crisis, gives war poetry an extra-literary importance.

The aim of the research:

This research aims at studying how the poets of the Great War has reacted towards war in pre-war time and during war time and what are the moods which have been highlighted in the poems of the war poets under discussions. The researcher has observed three major moods of the poets towards the war which can be represented in the poems of the three war poets selected for this research (Robert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen).

Poets' Reaction to the Great War:

During World War I, soldiers were subjected to trench warfare and mustard gas. Many poets have written about wars of which they have had no direct experience; it is the "soldier-poet" who has the firsthand knowledge of what war can do, not only to the body but also to the psyche. For them, the experience was not an abstract concept, or a political exercise for the greater good. It was a terrifying every day event that the soldier-poet found a way to transform into poetry. In the heartbreaking poem "Dulce et Decorum Est," Owen speaks of his experience at the front; the opening stanza paints a grim picture of a soldier's dire situation:

*Bent double, like beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.*

The reality of the Western Front for the average soldier could not have been more different. Purposeful activity with a clear objective was replaced by confusion and apparent chaos, cowering in muddy trenches for no obvious reason other than to avoid death, with death itself seldom heroic but rather random and deeply unpleasant. Awakened by this first taste of trench warfare and affected by the appalling conditions and constant danger, Sassoon's poetry became much harder in both language and tone, with his earlier romantic verse forgotten in favour of the ugly reality he was now experiencing.

1) Mood of Initial Reaction to the War:

Robert Brooke is the most famous representative of the initial reaction to the war. He represented the first mood towards the war which was a patriotic promotion. The truth is that Robert Brooke actually saw little combat during the war; he contracted blood-poisoning from a small neglected injury and died in April, 1915. His war sonnets were written in the first flush of patriotism and enthusiasm as a generation unused to war rushed to defend king and country.

*If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware....
(from war sonnets- sonnet V. The soldier).*

Rupert Brooke has written five war sonnets entitled "1914". These war sonnets enshrine more effectively the reaction to the war of Brooke and millions of others involved in the initial enthusiasm. These sonnets have been lauded as being "among the supreme expressions of English patriotism and

among the few notable poems produced by the Great War. "Probably no poems have been so acclaimed and so disparaged within the space of one generation as these five sonnets. Gregson J. M (1976:7)

According to Roberts David (2014:39) "The group of five sonnets called 1914 that Rupert Brooke wrote in December 1914 and finished in January 1915 became, within a few months, some of the most praised and widely read poems of their day". However, for Bergonzi, Bernard (1980:41) "The sonnets themselves are not very amenable to critical discussion. They are works of very great mythic power, since they formed a unique focus for what the English felt, or wanted to feel; in 1914-15: they crystallize the powerful archetype of Brooke, the young Apollo, in his sacrificial role of the hero-as-victim. Considered, too, as historical documents, they are of interest as an index to the popular state of mind in the early months of the war. But considered more narrowly and exactly as poems, their inadequacy is very patent."

A common element in all five of the war sonnets of Brooke is a preoccupation with death. It is disenchantment with life which makes him willingly embrace war as a heroic purposeful variant to his own rather aimless life, and a soldier's death as an honourable escape. Death is the theme of all five of the war sonnets and two of them are actually titled "The Dead". According to Sassoon "Rupert Brooke was miraculously right when he said 'Safe shall be my going. Secretly armed against all death's endeavour; Safe though all safety's lost'. He described the true soldier-spirit- saint and hero like Norman Donaldson and thousands of others who have been killed and died happier than they lived". Roberts David (2014:45)

*Now, God be thanked Who has watched us with His hour,
And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,
With handmade sure, clear eye, and sharpened power,
To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping,
Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary,
Leave the sick hearts that honour could not move,
And half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary,
And all the little emptiness of love! (Peace.LL. 1-8).*

The second war sonnet, 'Safety', celebrates in sonorous bardic lines the notion that death in this honourable war is the surest guarantee of safety. It was an emotional time and the initial enthusiasm now looks like mass hysteria. The illustrations of the war sonnets reveals important deficiencies as well as virtues already remarked : both are well illustrated in the most famous of his 1914 sonnets, which are the only two not so far considered in details. The third and fourth ones are entitled "The Dead" and the fifth is "The Soldier".

"The Dead" reveals a considerable mastery of the sonnet form as well as usual melodic persuasion:

*Blow out, you bugles, over the rich Dead!
There's none of these so lonely and poor of old,
But, dying, has made us rarer gifts than gold.
These laid the world away; poured out the red
Sweet wine of youth; gave up the years to be
Of work and joy, and that unhoped serene,
That men call age; and those who would have been,
Their sons, they gave, their immortality.
Blow, bugles, blow! They brought us, for our dearth,
Holiness, lacked so long, and Love, and Pain.
Honour has come back, as a king, to earth,
And paid his subjects with a royal wage;
And Nobleness walks in our ways again;
And we have come into our heritage.*

The use of ever vaguer and grander abstractions - from the dead he moves to youth, age, immortality, holiness, honour and nobleness- give a consistency of effect which is typical of the most telling use of sonnet form. The idea of the bloodshed in war as "the sweet wine of youth" and the conceit of the dead giving up their tangible link with posterity because they died before siring offspring, "those who would have been" are perfectly clear, even if rather high flown. Brooke seems to have seized the opportunity of the war to project the private poetic preoccupation with death noted earlier into a generalized context.

2) Mood of Anger and Disillusion

Sassoon was the first English poet to rebel with vigor and passion against the old traditions of war poetry, and he was one of very few poets who expressed this mood continually and violently while the war was still in progress. For Daiches David (1978), Siegfried Sassoon was one of the first writers brave enough to use poetry to describe war as it really is: brutalizing, destructive, horrific, and an indefensible waste of human lives. Siegfried Sassoon who was to become a very bitter about the war as time went on, was the first of the well-known war poets to sign up in response to the actions of Germany. Moreover, in his *Memoirs of a Foxhunting Man*, he gives us a few clues showing his reactions towards the war. "The war was inevitable and justifiable. Courage remains a virtue ... I had serious aspiration to heroism ... My one idea was to be first in the field. In fact I made quite an impressive inward emotional experience of it. ... My gesture was so to speak an individual one, and I gloried in it". Quoted in Roberts David (2014: 114)

He was thinking seriously about what the war mean. His first war poems, not surprisingly, are in keeping with the popular spirit of the times. His bitterness and hatred of the war did not begin until early 1916. The poem "*Absolution*" expresses his early reaction towards the war:

*The anguish of the earth absolves our eyes
Till beauty shines in all that we can see.
War is our scourge; yet war has made us wise,
And, fighting for our freedom, we are free.
Horror of wounds and anger at the foe,
And loss of things desired; all these must pass.
We are the happy legion, for we know
Time's but a golden wind that shakes the grass.
There was an hour when we were loth to part
From life we longed to share no less than others.
Now, having claimed this heritage of heart,
What need we more, my comrades and my brothers?*

Many young men like Siegfried Sassoon went into the First World War with this kind of idealism. The carnage they found there came as a tremendous shock: the way modern war was fought was different - and horrifying. His memoirs show how troubling and confusing it was to be in the midst of noise and devastation. What soldiers suffered knocked all the grand ideals and flowery language out of Sassoon's poetry. War, he wrote, 'had become undisguisedly mechanical and inhuman. What in earlier days had been drafts of volunteers were now droves of victims.' Now he had to express the inhumanity of war in his poems.

Siegfried Sassoon spoke out publicly against the war (and yet returned to it); he influenced and mentored the then unknown Wilfred Owen (shocking, realistic war poetry - he was also a soldier-) ; he spent thirty years reflecting on the war through his memoirs; and at last he found peace in his religious faith. Some critics found his later poetry lacking in comparison to his war poems. In July 1917 he made a written statement about his objection to the war and gave it to his commanding officer. He also refused to return to the front line, though he knew that he risked court martial and severe punishment. Here are some of the words of Siegfried Sassoon's 'Statement':

The poems of Sassoon express a mood of anti-heroic revolt with such fervour and harsh wit, strike a new and incisive note in the literature of war. Sometimes these poems 'rise to an unusual level of poetic intensity, as in *'On Passing the New Menin Gate'*:

*Here was the world's worst wound. And here with pride
 'Their name liveth for ever,' the Gateway claims.
 Was ever an immolation so belied
 As these intolerably nameless names?
 Well might the Dead who struggled in the slime
 Rise and deride this sepulchre of crime. (On Passing the New Menin Gate, LL. 9-14)*

Sassoon has illustrated clearly his attitude to the war. In the poem *"They"*, when the soldier boys come back they will not be the same; for they have fought in a just cause. Daiches David (1978: 63)

*'We're none of us the same!' the boys reply.
 'For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;
 Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;
 And Bert's gone syphilitic; you'll not find
 A chap who's served that hasn't found some change. (Sassoon's 'They'. LL. 7-11)*

Sassoon himself has commented on his own poetry and the purposes for writing poetry. He wrote: "Many of my shorter poems have been written with the sense of emotional release and then preferred by revision- often after being put away for a long time. Others have been produced by mental concentration and word seeking which lasted two or three hours. But there was usually a feeling of having said what I wanted to with directness and finality. Why can't they realize that the war poems were improvised by an impulsive, tolerant, immature young creature, under extreme stress of experience? I should say myself that the essential quality (of my poems) is that I have been true to what I experienced. All the best ones are truly experienced and therefore authentic in expression". Roberts David (2014:139)

When we consider the writers who emerged from the Great War Era, one of the most prominent is Siegfried Sassoon. His poetry is remembered for the satirical edge of its criticism of the military high command and disdain for unquestioning patriotism, with the anger and indignation present in much of his verse characteristic of many men who served in the trenches. He is a remarkable one of the World War I poets who transformed literature's landscape, portrayed the conflict with a gritty realism previously avoided by the romanticists.

3) The Mood of Wider Vision on War

Wilfred Owen has represented the third mood towards the war which is the wider vision of war. By the end of war, during bloodshed and misery intensify, the outcome seems no more certain no more swiftly attained. Protest against the continuance of hostilities makes old romanticism both blind and morally objectionable. There emerges from all the experience a moment in which a poet ceases to be moralist and accepts the state of war as the inevitable condition against which the individual's struggle is fruitless. That was the last mood during war time. Wilfred Owen attempted to take these war themes into more generalized vein and applied new techniques for his wider vision on war.

Perhaps the best of all the poetry produced as a result of the war was written by Wilfred Owen who was born in 1893 and was killed in November 4, 1918 exactly a week before Armistice. His war experience found him with no preconceived attitude; he was honest both as a man and as a poet, and he waited to see what the war was to mean for him and his poetry. He brought all his powers of poetic expression- still at the experimental stage- to his endeavor to find and to express the real meaning of the situation in which he found himself. He moved slowly from description to interpretation, his earlier war poetry being concerned with adequate expression of the fact and his later verse endeavoring to arrange the facts in some symbolic and significant pattern. Daiches David (1978)

Owen's first poetic treatment of the war is a sonnet called '1914' which is of interest both for its resemblances and its unlikeness to the state of mind expressed in Rupert Brooke's 1914:

*War broke: and now the Winter of the world
With perishing great darkness closes in.
The foul tornado, centred at Berlin,
Is over all the width of Europe whirled,
Rending the sails of progress. Rent or furled
Are all Art's ensigns. Verse wails. Now begin
Famines of thought and feeling. Love's wine's thin
The grain of human Autumn rots, down-hurled.
For after Spring had bloomed in early Greece,
And Summer blazed her glory out with Rome,
An Autumn softly fell, a harvest home,
A slow grand age, and rich with all increase.
But now, for us, wild Winter, and the need
Of sowings for new Spring, and blood for seed.*

In preparing a work for posterity, Owen wrote in his planned introduction to his war poems: "This book is not about heroes. English Poetry is not yet fit to speak of them. Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War. Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.

Owen's progress was not, however, a simple one from satiric to contemplative war poems. The violent anger that breaks through the poems like "Mental Cases" and "Disabled" and other poems is that of a man who has not resigned himself to express merely the pity of war, but who is equally anxious to convey its terror, its horror and its cruelty. But in the midst of these we begin to find more disciplined verse sounding a profounder note, poems whose simple elegiac quality indicates Owen's progress towards the ideal indicated in the draft preface. Daiches David (1978:69) Owen was developing rapidly, seeking out new attitudes, mastering new subtleties of techniques, responding to experiences with that adaptability both as a man and as a poet which distinguishes the genuine artists from the talented pedant.

Many commentators have emphasized that Wilfred Owen exhibited more potential to continue and enlarge the craft of poetry than any of the soldier-poets of World War I. He was a technician, an innovator, a "poet's poet" long before he was a proud soldier, a horrified combatant, and a victim. The kinds of criticisms applied to Rupert Brooke (immature, too much style, and too little substance) or Siegfried Sassoon (limited, more propaganda than art) have little validity when it comes to Owen. Reisman, R. M. C. (2012: 138).

Owen was brought to a cruelly premature flowering in the hothouse of the Western Front, and his work shows something of the fragility as well as the brilliance of the forced product. It was Owen who revealed how, out of realistic horror and scorn, poetry might be made. War was no longer the same; modern technology had seen to that; and Owen ensured that it could no longer be seen as the same. In theory, no doubt, to die in agony from a gas attack was no different from dying 'cleanly' by the sword or a bullet in the traditional manner; in practice, however, the discrepancy between ends and means became too great, and the horror of the means discredited the end:

*If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud(12)
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest(13)
To children ardent(14) for some desperate glory,*

The old Lie; Dulce et Decorum est.

Pro patria mori. (Owen's Dulce et Decorum est. LL. 21-28)

Impact of the Great War on English Poetry

At the beginning of the war, many of the war poets had an almost exultant attitude to 'doing good' in this 'Great War' as though it was a crusade. Many of them were elegant well-educated young men from England's shires and as such were happy to fight for its preservation. Rupert Brooke actually saw little combat during the war; he contracted blood-poisoning from a small neglected injury and died in April, 1915. His war sonnets were written in the first flush of patriotism and enthusiasm as a generation unused to war rushed to defend king and country.

*If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware....
(from Rupert Brooke 's War Sonnets- sonnet V.The soldier)*

Later in the war, many soldiers and influential people would become embittered by the sacrifice of the flower of England's youth to a hopeless and incompetent campaign. World War I broke out on a largely innocent world, a world that still associated warfare with glorious cavalry charges and noble pursuit of heroic ideals. People were wholly unprepared for the horrors of modern trench warfare, and the Great War wiped out virtually a whole generation of young men and shattered so many illusions and ideals. Mahmud M. R. (2007:25)

Both Sassoon and Owen wrote war poetry to inform people of the realities of war. Sassoon's efforts to publicly decry the war were stunted when the military announced he suffered from shell-shock and sent him to a hospital to recover. His poetry became the means of sharing his opinion that the war had "become a war of aggression and conquest,". He wanted to share with the public the true cost of war. His bitterness against the war is made clear through his poetry, which is filled with his resentment against war, the futility of it and the high price that had to be paid. He uses many different ways to convey his feelings, and particularly his bitterness and resentment towards the war and the officers, but in all his poems, his true meanings are clear and he writes in such a way that shows us clearly what he thinks and feels about the war.

During the Great War the most recognized and admired poets, including those who had served on the western front and knew first hand of the slaughter and horrors of trench warfare, not only supported the war effort but also encouraged its continuation. These admired war poets hid the horrible truth of modern mechanical warfare using archaic language and lofty phrases. Lyric rejection of the war during the war itself was rare. For the majority, the rejection of the war was a postwar phenomenon. None of the soldier poets who wrote during the war ever questioned Britain's right to be at war, not even the minority of the British soldier poets who wrote vivid and telling poems critical of the war and its continuation. The prevailing voices during the war were those who wanted to continue the struggle.

The Great War / World War I became an occasion for a crusade that saw the mobilization of an extraordinary language filled with abstract euphemistic spiritualized words and phrases under which were buried the longer the war lasted, the more ridiculous such elegant words and asinine language sounded to the majority of the common soldiers in the trenches. What the great war of 1914-18 did to English poetry is very difficult to determine. Of course it produced "War Poetry" a poetry which changed its characteristics as the realities of war became better known. Daiches David (1978)

The best war poets always know that they involve themselves in a monstrous negotiation between artistic pleasure and human suffering, and that there is readable enjoyment to be elicited from a choking gas-victim or a three-week-dead enemy corpse. War poetry is attracted to pain, and makes artistic capital out of it. Until the First World War, there was little or no anti-war art. The First World War generated a

plethora of anti-war reactions in the visual arts as well as other arts such as literature and poetry. Artists, writers and poets conscripted into the war powerfully and graphically captured the senseless slaughter which took the lives of millions.

No other war challenged existing conventions, morals, and ideals in the same way as World War I did. World War I saw the mechanization of weapons (heavy artillery, tanks), the use of poison gas, the long stalemate on the Western Front, and trench warfare, all of which resulted in the massive loss of human life. 'Shocking the war poems are. Certainly among the most descriptive and horrifying of their era, they continue to penetrate minds supposedly benumbed by exposure to the twentieth century'. Reisman, R. M. C. (2012: 139).

Many young men shared the sentimental view of war, which found its expression in the poetry. Having poets put their experiences into poetry helped to educate the public about war and added a powerful voice to the public discourse. These poets served as representatives of what could happen to all soldiers. Reisman, R. M. C. (2012: 2).

Summary:

During the Great War the most recognized and admired poets, including those who had served on the western front and knew first hand of the slaughter and horrors of trench warfare, not only supported the war effort but also encouraged its continuation. These admired war poets hid the horrible truth of modern mechanical warfare using archaic language and lofty phrases. Lyric rejection of the war during the war itself was rare. For the majority, the rejection of the war was a postwar phenomenon. None of the soldier poets who wrote during the war ever questioned Britain's right to be at war, not even the minority of the British soldier poets who wrote vivid and telling poems critical of the war and its continuation. The prevailing voices during the war were those who wanted to continue the struggle.

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The impact of the Great War's brutality was magnified by its contrast to the material comfort and pleasantness of the decades that preceded it. After the war, fatalism and cynicism became hallmarks of literature, art, music and politics. Progress, which had been deified even as liberalism fell into disrepute, was "finally unmasked" as an "illusion."

The Great War reflects not only the personal tragedy which attends all war, but the debacle of the West discarding the principles and values which had made it great by engaging in a senseless, fratricidal conflict, the effects of which we are only now escaping. Reading the poetry of that period, one grieves not only for the individual soldier, but for the world he represented, a liberal realm of reason beset by forces which would bring about the death of that world as surely as the trench bomb would take the life of a number of soldiers.

The personal tragedies of the men in the trenches mirrored the larger disaster of the end of the world of the mind. Moreover, while the trench-poet saw only the death of his civilization, we see two things he could not: the greater tragedies that followed in the wake of the war, and, in many cases, the death of the poet himself, like Owen who died one week before war end and Rupert Brooke, who made his reputation as a poet before the war, died of blood poisoning April 17, 1915.

The war poets of the Great War have represented three different major moods and reactions towards the war. Robert Brooke is the most famous representative of the initial reaction of to the war. He represented the first mood towards the war which was a patriotic promotion. Siegfried Sassoon is the most vigorous exponent of the anger and disillusion. He has represented the second mood towards the war where the poets began to find reasons for becoming tentative in their patriotism and with drawing into a more meditative position. By the end of war, during bloodshed and misery intensify, the outcome seems no

more certain no more swiftly attained. Protest against the continuance of hostilities makes old romanticism both blind and morally objectionable. Wilfred Owen has represented the third mood towards the war in which there emerges from all the experience a moment in which a poet ceases to be moralist and accepts the state of war as the inevitable condition against which the individual's struggle is fruitless. These were the three moods represented in the poetry of the Great war and this research has observed and has given examples to illustrate.

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